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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

23 January 1985

SYRIA: Discussion Topics with Israeli Defense Minister Rabin

Summary

The following memorandum addresses several Syrian-related topics that Israeli Defense Minister Rabin is likely to raise during his visit later this month. [redacted]

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President Assad's determination to force a total Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and his limited capability to impose tight control on Shia extremists or Palestinian reinfiltration into the South mean that terrorist incidents there are unlikely to diminish following the initial stages of the Israeli pullout. [redacted]

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There are indications of increased frictions between Moscow and Damascus, but we believe Soviet-Syrian relations remain intact. Moscow continues to regard Syria as its most important asset in the Middle East, while Damascus sees no alternative to the USSR as a reliable patron. [redacted]

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Syria has accelerated the modernization of its armed forces in an effort to attain strategic balance with Israel. Syria's reliance on more and better hardware, however, is unlikely to compensate for continuing deficiencies in manpower, training, and leadership, precluding the possibility of true military parity with Israel in the foreseeable future. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis at the request of the National Security Council. Information as of 23 January 1985 was used in its preparation. Queries and comments are welcome and should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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Support for Terrorism

President Assad's regime continues to use terrorism against the Israeli presence in Lebanon and as a tool to support its policy objectives in Arab regional disputes. The US Embassy in Damascus points out that when Syrian diplomacy has failed, Assad has resorted to murder and intimidation both domestically and abroad. He will continue to use whatever assets are available, including radical Shias, extremist Palestinians such as those of the Abu Nidal Group, or--as a last resort--Syrian intelligence agents.

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The Syrians support radical Shia terrorist activities in South Lebanon as "national resistance," despite the long-term dangers to Syrian interests posed by Shia extremism. In effect, Assad has gambled that a damper can be put on communal tension and Shia radicalization in Lebanon following Israel's withdrawal. Given Lebanon's importance to Damascus as a core security concern, Damascus has chosen the dangers of continuing turmoil in the South rather than to do anything that reduces Israeli casualties or compromises Syria's "no concessions" policy.

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Assad's determination to force a total Israeli withdrawal --together with Syria's limited capability to impose tight control over Shia extremists or to impose a total ban on Palestinian reinfiltration--suggests that the level of violence in South Lebanon will not drop following the first stages of Israeli withdrawal. Short of a total Israeli pullout, the Syrians are unlikely to confront the challenge of imposing greater order in the South.

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In response to increasing Syrian isolation on regional issues, Assad has fallen back on support for terrorist groups targeting Jordanian and moderate Palestinian interests. Damascus almost certainly is implicated in the recent terrorist incidents in Amman and in Europe. The Syrian-supported Abu Nidal Group, for example, was probably responsible for the killing of a Jordanian Embassy official in Bucharest in early December. Despite private denials by Syrian officials, Damascus probably also instigated the killing of PLO Executive Committee member Fahd al-Qawasmah late last month.

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Soviet-Syrian Relations

Friction between Syria and the USSR has reemerged after two-and-a-half years of comparative harmony in their relations. The withdrawal of US forces from Beirut and the abrogation of the Lebanon-Israel agreement, diminished the need to present a united front. The Soviets apparently feel less constrained in voicing

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their displeasure with Syrian policy toward the PLO and on the Iran-Iraq war, and reportedly did so during Assad's visit to Moscow last October. The Syrians, for their part, refused to yield to Soviet views on these issues and almost certainly expressed their own opposition to Soviet overtures to the moderate Arab states.

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Moscow is taking a tougher line on economic issues.

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According to the US Embassy in Damascus, the Soviets offered no new economic aid during the Assad-Chernenko summit and instead criticized Syrian economic policies.

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Soviet air defense troops are departing Syria as the turnover to Syrian control of the two SA-5 missile complexes at Hims and Dumayr nears completion. Approximately 3,000 Soviet military advisers will continue to assist the Syrian armed forces. Without their own forces on the "front line," the Soviets will feel less compelled to go beyond what they have done in the past in coming to Syria's defense in the event of another war with Israel. They will also have less say over how Syria uses Soviet weapons.

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Despite the reemergence of friction in their relations and Moscow's less direct military role, we believe the broader aspects of Soviet-Syrian ties will remain intact. Moscow continues to regard Syria as its most important asset in the region and appears willing to provide Syria with more and better weapons to preserve Soviet influence. The Syrians have no alternative to the Soviets as a reliable arms supplier and probably see ties to Moscow as even more critical at a time when their current adversaries --Egypt, Jordan, Iran, and PLO leader Arafat--are moving closer together.

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Recent economic agreements illustrate the durability of Soviet-Syrian ties. Last September, Damascus selected a Soviet

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bid for a thermal power plant over a technically superior Japanese offer, primarily on political grounds. The Syrians have also concluded an agreement with the Soviets to continue preparatory work for construction of a nuclear power plant and a small research reactor. [redacted]

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Search for Strategic Balance

The poor performance of the Syrian military during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, demonstrated that Syria was far from attaining military parity and spurred Syrian efforts to rearm. With Soviet assistance, Damascus has fielded new armored units, nearly completed the mechanization of its infantry, significantly improved its air defenses, and has begun absorbing some of the latest Soviet military hardware such as the SS-21 surface-to-surface missile, the MIG-23 Flogger G interceptor and the Vektor-II command and control system. [redacted]

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By mid-1984, the Syrian military was large enough to permit Damascus to fight simultaneously in Lebanon and the Golan Heights while still maintaining two divisions as a strategic reserve. Ground forces manpower probably now totals about 300,000. [redacted]

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The major thrust in modernizing the Syrian Air Force has been expansion and the acquisition of advanced aircraft. The Air Force has more than doubled the number of its operational squadrons since 1973 and now has Soviet MIG-23 and MIG-25 interceptors and MIG-23 and SU-20/22 ground attack aircraft. The avionics and overall capabilities of the Soviet-supplied aircraft, however, are inferior to those of the Israeli Air Force. [redacted]

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Syria has also expanded its air defense force, more than doubling the number of launchers and units since 1975, and has modified its mission and organization to concentrate on SAM defense of airfields. [redacted]

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Major obstacles will delay Syria's military modernization and probably preclude the attainment of true military parity with Israel. Syria continues to rely on more and better hardware to achieve strategic balance, but the quantity and quality of equipment are not the primary determinants of military effectiveness. There must be enough skilled men to fill the ranks of the growing armed forces, and they must be well trained and well led. In all three areas--manpower, training, and leadership--the Syrian armed forces are and will remain significantly inferior to those of Israel. [redacted]

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Syria is unlikely to initiate war with Israel until Damascus believes it has achieved military parity. Even if defined in limited terms, such as the capability to hold off Israeli counterattacks until outside powers intervene and stop the war, Syria probably cannot attain this objective before the end of the century. There are risks, however, that Syria will incorrectly conclude that its military has achieved parity or near parity and that Damascus will pursue more aggressive policies leading--either intentionally or accidentally--to war with Israel. [redacted]

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